

U.S. Air Force Investigates Radiological Waste Burial

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The U.S. Air Force is investigating whether radioactive waste is buried at more than 80 former and current air bases across the country, including the site of a new federal prison in central California.

Air Force health experts believe the radioactive material, generated by nuclear-weapons maintenance in the 1950s and 1960s, poses "no immediate public health risk as long as these burial sites are not disturbed," according to the Air Force's written responses to questions posed by The Wall Street Journal. It is far from certain, however, that the sites are undisturbed: Many of the former bases were decommissioned and cleared for public use years ago.

For example, the \$100 million, maximum-security penitentiary in Atwater, Calif., east of San Francisco, occupies the former Castle Air Force Base, once part of the Cold War-era Strategic Air Command. The recently built prison is on a part of the base near where munitions were kept -- and where investigators from the Air Force Safety Center suspect nuclear weapons were maintained and stored.

The radiation investigation is one of several lingering environmental sores afflicting the Pentagon as it unloads dozens of military bases around the country. Since the radiological sites haven't been monitored in years, military officials aren't certain where such waste is buried and whether the dumping areas pose a danger. The matter has gained new urgency as the Air Force seeks to have more bases converted into parks, schools and other uses, potentially exposing more civilians to risk.

Burial of radiological waste in shallow trenches or sealed pipes was the "prescribed" disposal method in the 1950s and '60s, the Air Force says. It was assumed low levels of radioactivity wouldn't penetrate the soil cover. The buried materials included wipes, gloves, protective clothing and tape used to clean and maintain so-called unsealed nuclear weapons -- early devices in which the nuclear material was kept separate from the trigger.

The Air Force says it lost track of the burial sites because of poor record keeping and is trying to identify and inspect the lands for safety concerns. The Air Force says its real-estate managers learned about the buried waste a few years ago. But an internal Air Force survey from 1972, reviewed by The Wall Street Journal, indicates many of the radioactive dumps were well documented at least three decades ago. The report, entitled "Burial of Radioactive Waste in the USAF," named 46 bases where the service knew radioactive waste was buried, including Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas, and others on the list of 80 bases the Air Force may investigate.

In most cases, the report recommended digging up the waste for proper disposal by licensed contractors. The report also recommended amending Air Force procedures on such sites, "to prevent their return to civilian control without some consideration of the radioactive contamination." Last week, the Air Force told federal, state and local officials in California it will dispatch technical teams to the Castle site next week to brief officials there about possible radioactive waste. Teams also will re-

evaluate buildings, at Castle and elsewhere, to be sure they still are suitable for public use, according to an Air Force fact sheet distributed in some local communities.

Atwater and Merced County officials said no prison inmates are housed in former base buildings, although the prison uses some old Castle facilities for storage and maintenance.

In Washington, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons declined to comment on the investigation, referring questions to the Air Force. The Air Force also is looking at the decommissioned Plattsburgh Air Force Base, in upstate New York. The Air Force has told the base-conversion agency that experts will investigate a former weapons-storage area, now occupied by a Canadian company, Nexia Biotechnologies.

Lenny Siegel, director of the nonprofit Center for Public Environmental Oversight, which monitors military cleanups, praises the Air Force for disclosing the current investigation. But it would have been more timely a decade ago, when many of the bases were closed and the cleanups began, he says.

The Air Force, in its written responses to questions, says the delay was caused by lax record-keeping in the 1950s and 1960s. But community leaders think there's more to it. "We're very suspicious they're still trying to cover things up," says Angel Martinez, an organizer with Southwest Workers Union, a nonprofit group that has battled the Air Force for years over cleanup of the former Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio. Kelly's radioactive waste site -- buried beneath the sixth fairway on the base's golf course -- was on the Air Force's list in 1972 and is among the 80 bases where radioactive waste may be buried. A 1999 "Public Health Assessment," by the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, found the buried site at Kelly didn't pose a public-health threat. But Ms. Martinez says many of the poor, mostly Hispanic residents living nearby worry about what they see as elevated rates of cancer, diabetes and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, as possibly linked to radioactivity or other contaminants. "We're fighting for them to clean up the base as a whole," she says, "but they say it's too expensive to dig all that stuff out. They look at the cost more than anything else."

Radiation is a known cause of some types of cancer; the causes of ALS are unknown. In public-health terms, the Air Force says its "worst case" estimate for radioactivity exposure at undisturbed burial sites is less than 0.4 millirem per year. That is a small fraction of the 25 millirems per year the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission deems dangerous, the Air Force says, and the 15 millirems per year the Environmental Protection Agency considers hazardous.

Some businesses occupying the former base sites were shocked to learn the Air Force is raising these questions now. In Plattsburgh, Nexia's chief executive officer, Jeffrey Turner, said he wasn't aware there was a radiological-waste probe. Daniel Wieneke, president and chief executive of Plattsburgh Airbase Redevelopment Corp., which operates the thriving industrial park on Lake Champlain, said, "We'll have to look at the risk-assessment values and proceed after the Air Force does its investigation. It is late in the game to have this come on, very late in the game."

In addition to the Castle and Plattsburgh bases, the Air Force plans on-site investigations at three other decommissioned installations: March Air Force Base in Riverside, Calif.; Pease Air Force Base in

Portsmouth, N.H.; and Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth. The Air Force said it believes radiological material may be buried at the five sites, based on documents and interviews with retired personnel. It is weighing whether to expand inspections to the list of 80 or so active and inactive bases where nuclear weapons were once handled.